

WHAT IS PLACE-BASED LEARNING?

Chapter 2 of
To Know The Joy of
Work Well Done
Place-Based Learning &
Sustaining School Communities

James Lewicki M.S., M.E.P.D., B.A., A.A.
www.jameslewicki.org

Chapter 2

Place-Based Learning

If a child happens to show that he knows any fact about astronomy, or plants, or birds, or rocks, or history, that interests him and you, hush all the classes and encourage him to tell it so that all may hear. Then you have made your schoolroom like the world.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

I had never known just how fantastic science could be...For me being in the field, mucking around in ponds, spending whole days outdoors and using all my senses to take in the knowledge that textbooks try to pound in with facts, was wonderful. For me there is no better way to introduce students to a subject than by literally making it real to them. Learning took on a whole new dimension for me.

- Ximena, 14, Wisconsin

I have had many best moments in my educational career, many times when the fire of learning was alight and the focus of the student community was bright. By sharing voices from students I hope to underscore, from their perspectives, the taproot of place based learning. As a continuing and consistent part of my life's work, this approach to education has been a worthy partner. I will explore the primary features of place-based learning, before moving onto aspects that ring true with educators, students, and community members from across the country and in many different kinds of schools.

Place-based learning is a term that embraces a philosophical and pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. As an organizing principle, this approach to learning is a broad pathway, a 'curriculum construct' that is the compelling learning blueprint for a new or reinvented school, grade level, subject-area department, or a classroom. Though the 1990's witnessed a significant emergence of this approach (see: www.ruraledu.org) the qualitative aspects of place-based learning have deep and interlocking historical roots. Evidence of place-based education permeates the education literature from John Dewey to today.¹ I prefer to term it place-based learning, as it has been for me a vivid verb in my teaching career.

My memories of place influencing learning go back to my first years of teaching. One event was an important marker for my emerging teaching years in alerting me to the power of place in a student's learning cosmology.

It was an early morning fire drill one spring. Shirt sleeved students milled about snow-free sidewalks, talking in staccatos of enthusiasm, the warmth and sunshine activating awareness of the changing seasons. Each group soaked in gallons of fresh air, aware of the contrast between a winter of 'insidiness' and the spring surrounding them. Later this very same day, I led my fourth-grade class back outside for a journal activity. The day before, the wind had whipped, the air temperature never breaking 30 degrees. This day the students stepped outside into a 65-degree calm, blue sky. Huge amounts of water melted from assorted playground snow piles. Miniature lakes built from snow dams suddenly broke, releasing a flurry of sound as water cascaded downhill. Our class found the only place to write - a piece of sun-

dried sidewalk running parallel to the playground. Each student sat down, took a few sensory moments, and then wrote in his or her journal. Erica, 10, wrote with a strong flourish of pen across paper, and in a few stunning moments handed me the following.

Spring certainly has its miracles. What miracles? Baby animals, rushing water. But to me, there is something deeper in spring. I have memories. Memories of my Grandpa playing with me when I was only five. Memories of my family taking trips. That's what I find special in spring.

Everyone finds something different in the rushing water, the returning birds. Not in sight alone, but in thought and in heart.

When I look into the partly frozen river, I wonder how many people, old and young, have listened, seen, and wondered as well. I wonder how long it will be until the partly frozen river will be destroyed by the coming of spring.

This is my favorite time of year. Everything is new. Everything is warm and bright, inside and outside.

Spring is magic.

I can touch the feeling then, today: surprise, delight, and finally a wave of appreciation regarding the bottomless capacities of young students to connect with place and then convey deep thoughts.

Again and again, I have experienced student writing -- engaged by place -- to be profound and potent. Given the time and space - and in this case, place - young people readily engage in thoughtful writing like Erica's piece.

Two widely read and deeply respected authors regarding place-based learning are David Orr and Paul Theobald. Orr envisions place-based learning as "a patient and disciplined effort to learn, and in some ways, to relearn the arts of inhabitation. These will differ from place to place, reflecting various culture, values, and ecologies. They will, however, share a common sense of rootedness in a particular locality."²

In effect, Orr is looking for place as the framing of purposeful schooling. How well do our students really

understand their home communities? How well do they grasp the many unique features of their local landscape? What stories from elders have they heard? What stories from elders have they not heard? Whether a rural area, small town, suburban enclave, or urban neighborhood, there are literally thousands of ideas that place-based teaching and learning embrace to provide students this ‘rootedness’.

Theobald describes how place-based learning can bring subject matter into a forceful means for student understanding. “The school’s place allows educators to take what is artificial out of the schooling experience.”³ Theobald details this development more by digging into the instructional possibilities of place-based learning. “Students can arrive at a deeper understanding of, say, mathematics, when it is used to chart the trajectories of local disposable income. They arrive at a better understanding of life sciences by doing an audit of local flora and fauna. They understand history as a force in one’s life when they chart the historical developments that have left their community in its current condition. They understand the power of aesthetics in one’s life when their efforts in art class culminate in a community mural, or when the music class captures the ethos of an era and shares it with other generations.”⁴

This artificial aspect that Theobald underscores is evident when subject lessons ring hollow with skills that are looking for a home to be applied in. From kindergarten to twelfth grade, schooling has become largely an inside occupation. We cut off children and youth from the outside world; and in so doing cut them off from the vitality and richness of the community – both natural and social -- as the ‘ultimate teacher’. We have brought generations inside, creating artificial learning scenarios, increasing the disconnection of each succeeding generation from these natural and social systems that have been our truest teachers for millennia. This circumstance has resulted in students missing out on the vast potential of community study, habitat study, and the overarching narrative of home; in effect, developing deep understanding and connections to one’s place. Rather than

intensive seminars, projects, and symposiums – field studies-- students are left with the occasional field trip.

Where does the community really fit into the learning at hand? How can the interests and issues of small villages, rural towns, suburban enclaves, or urban centers be brought front and center into each student's academic life? For students, it isn't just their bodies that seldom get out; tragically, their view becomes too parochial as well. And, most critically, their ideas, solutions, and energy are untapped – held captive 95% of their K-12 education. Rather than holding the community as a catalyst, and a potential pedagogical framing of significant learning, an increasing separation splits the world of community from the world of school, at the exact time when young people are crying out for involvement and integration into the life of their home community and/or neighborhood.

Place-based learning embraces an approach to teaching where each student experiences the community anew. Place-based learning is not exceptional; rather it is education with the familiar material of the local place. Dovetailing science standards and art standards into a Botany project reflecting local flora expands the range of a student's ordinary schooling experience. I have named this cornerstone principle of place-based learning community sensibility, blending common sense and community awareness into the central features of lessons, units, projects, and, even the school's mission. During a place-based effort, teachers embrace this community sensibility by designing academic core objectives with community needs and resources so the result -- from the student's frame of learning – is that the two are indistinguishable from each other.

On one field study, I recall a student, with a tongue in cheek query, lifting a barbwire strand high so I could duck under it, when we were hiking through a pasture to an upland limestone formation. “Hey, Mr. L. is this when we go from our chemistry class (we had been doing water monitoring on a wetland) to our English class? (we were about to write some poetry in our journals, inspired by the view at the top of the limestone outcropping).

To clarify this feature, walk through the many school doors these days, too often the commercial textbooks and the aligned state and/or federal testing take a disproportionate place value, thereby driving the learning. Then – tragically -- a student's experience will,

too often, be devoid of the rich learning evident in local history, main street economics, and natural habitats; to pull only three foci from the hat of place-based learning. The consequence? Rather than holding the community as a catalyst and organizing place as a means of learning, a deception of what is important sets deep within each student. To be clear, this lack of looking at the community as a rich partner for core academics is very often the fault of a school's structure, rather than the imagination of the educators themselves. Much too frequently, we have created schools as indoor places, confined and confining with scanty, superficial connections to the community where reality is unfolding. And this community reality is time and time again what drives purposeful student learning in the schools that I work with these days. And – to be sure – realities that are unfolding in ways that ask, albeit silently, for the engagement of youth and youthful energies.

I have presented place-based learning to hundreds of educators across America and abroad. I seldom ever receive “barrier talk” about the concept itself. Most teachers readily grasp that local government can be a social studies workshop, watershed hydrology a great field-based science activity, forestry management a math project, and the local newspaper a great practicing Internship. What seems to get in the way is all the vast limiting conditions; the schedule, the budget, the permission, the entourage of assessment demands, and the isolation of the profession itself. These form an aggregate of barriers that have, too often, narrowed the teacher's dreams of what is possible.

At this defining time in education, after a generation of reform minded initiatives, and billions of dollars invested in change – it is time for the dream of place, the dream of engagement, and the dream of student's connecting place to themselves and others.

Place-based learning is often evident in student-led and student-initiated projects; yet it is more than projects alone. A critical community-partnering dimension to the mix is also needed. Barbara Cervone, director of What Kids Can Do www.whatkidscando.org (a national nonprofit that documents the value of young people working with teachers and other adults on projects that combine powerful learning with public purpose) stated this clearly when she pointed out:

The project work by students always involves a mentor, sometimes also an internship linked to the

project. In the case of the Rural Trust, the project work by students also must respond to and fill a community need; PBL [place-based learning], in the words of the Rural Trust, is a strategy through which "schools and communities get better together."⁵

Place-based learning is also about service, attending to the community. Woodhouse and Knapp describe that place-based pedagogy emerges from the particular attributes of a place, is inherently multidisciplinary and experiential while often including a participatory action or service.⁶ This service aspect is a great way to actually originate a good place-based commitment. Holding the community and its needs in consideration as students discuss their next academic steps often reveals some great project ideas. Like the 4th grade tree planting idea; often what is missing from a community becomes the gap that students want to bridge. And when they fill this gap successfully there is a wonderful sense of achievement. Cheri, a high school senior from South Dakota, echoed this sentiment when writing at a place-based conference:

We visit the elderly in my community and I visit my friend whose name is Hilde. She is 80 years old, and she is a widow. She lost her husband and never had any children, and she looks at me as her daughter. Hilde makes me feel needed, she never reflects on the bad, but the good. She has given me a chance to reflect on my future and given me a light I would never have seen before. This is the light of hope, courage, and bravery.

Place-based learning can also be examined through the lens of social change as well as academic achievement. Interviewed for the What Kids Can Do website, Doris Williams, then Capacity Building Director for the Rural School and Community Trust emphasized how building a partnership between young and old benefits both.

The adults have history and wisdom of the years, but the young people have their energy! And they are the ones who are in touch with the current situation, and wisdom from the years means nothing if you're not in touch with the current situation. It doesn't mean a whole lot if you don't have the energy to do something

with it! That's what young people bring. The civil rights movement would never have been a movement without young people. So it's important to link young people and adults, and get them respecting each other and respecting what each other has to say and what they think.⁷

From the community's perspective, place-based learning often asks that community members participate as partners in the education of the youth. Each community has numerous people with a wide range of talents and experience who can contribute-- applying and enriching the place-based curriculum. People with thoughtful ideas about place proliferate throughout each community.

Over the years, I have experienced many kinds of place-based learning. Each learning experience echoes the sound of community and school joining forces. Here are but a few examples:

- My colleague, Russell Gilbert, and myself worked with our 6th grade students in creating a maple syrup company. They tapped trees, bottled the syrup, made \$1,000 in profit, and formed a foundation to return \$100 grants back to the community.

- Each spring, my 4th grade students would visit Leita Slayton, a 50-year veteran of teaching. Leita was a remarkable woman who lived well into her 90's in the same log cabin her family built when they first arrived in the Kickapoo Valley during the 1850's. From this experience my students were inspired to research and narrate each family story of how they came to call the Kickapoo Valley home.

- Kickapoo River Institute students conducted long-term monitoring of hydraulic, plant, and wildlife changes in a Department of Natural Resources wetlands restoration project on 1,750 acres with a half-dozen new ponds recently 'scrapped'. This project entailed longitudinal field studies, working with a Department of Natural Resource soil scientist, hydrologist, and wildlife biologist.

- These same KRI students became involved in original primary

source research to examine the Kickapoo Valley Civil War veterans, pioneer heritage stories, and investigating a student's query "Did the Kickapoo Indians ever live in the Kickapoo Valley?" which asked for extensive archival research behind Native American treaties and Upper Mississippi early 19th century history.

- Native Plant Propagation: Students learned to propagate native plants from seeds and cuttings. Working with a local farm, students mastered techniques, then partnered with an AmeriCorps watershed project to transplant these plants in the schoolyard, community, and watershed restoration project
- County Beach Handbook : Students created a handbook of area beaches containing information that included: scientific and geological measurements, diagrams and facts, historical events, an identification for sea life, recreational information, ocean conservation information, maps, photos, drawings, etc. Working with a local geologist and harbormaster, the students involved various citizens, fishermen, divers, historians, and game wardens that also contributed to the handbook.
- Local Economic Development: A high school Future Business Leaders of America class conducted an economic inquiry into the spending patterns of members in their community. Results indicated that too much money was being spent outside the county, thus compromising the local tax base and, ultimately, contributing to the demise of county businesses. Sharing this information and conducting a 'buy local' campaign, the students were able to increase county spending over six months by several million dollars.
- Watershed Analysis: The Department of Wildlife partnered with several high schools to collect, tabulate, and compile necessary data regarding the Yampa River and watershed in Colorado. To provide a comprehensive river analysis, students measured pH, alkalinity, hardness, dissolved oxygen, metals, total dissolved solids, and water temperatures at different

points along the Yampa. Utilizing students as researchers provided many agencies with valuable data, and asked students to perform science at a 'useful' level.

- Tide Pools Brochure: Meeting a need in the community for an informative brochure, a group of high school students combined photography and advanced biology to produce both a brochure and website of tide pools along the California coast.
- Original Historical Research: A group of middle school students discovered some new facts about their neighborhood in a unique community history project related to local architecture. The neighborhood to the school had modest sized lots and a number of houses designed in the cottage or "Craftsman style." Their research revealed the relationship between the Craftsman movement and the Sears and Roebuck catalog, which sold thousands of "assemble yourself" home kits at the turn of the century. With a copy of the 1900 catalog, they discovered a number of genuine Sears Roebuck homes and verified their findings by checking deeds and building permits from the town office.
- Fine Arts CD: A school developed and produced an original CD title "Winter on the San Juan Ridge" that comprised original songs, artwork, storytelling, and poetry by students about their rural place. The \$1500 profit from the sale of 500 CD's helped create a new non-profit venture, Children Reaching Out, offering items in a catalogue, created and marketed by young people. This visual and performing arts project was achieved by tremendous support from area photographers, recording studios, authors, and small business people.¹⁰

Numerous community people enabled the depth and sophistication of these above projects and typically support place-based learning. Once community people are brought into the design and planning portfolio, an interaction between school and community builds a momentum upon itself, generating new contacts and avenues

of study. From my vantage point, the unheralded hero of successful place based learning is the community itself. A stronger school/community connection is the essence, the driving force. Using the daily life of the community to draw out lessons is nothing new. John Dewey set the philosophical tone early. Vito Perrone, noted Harvard Educator, Dean of Harvard Graduate School of Education, described Dewey's approach to education.

Dewey stressed the need for a "new pedagogy" that calls upon teachers to integrate the content of schooling with the activities of daily life. He understood the prevailing separation between school and life as assuring a limited education for children and young people, emptying the possibilities. In addition he viewed education at its best as growth in understanding, capacity, self-discovery, control of events, and ability to define the world--in other words, as always leading somewhere.⁸

Somewhere was often close to home. Dewey believed education was at its best when students were learning from "the familiar material of ordinary experience."⁹

Exciting ideas, what's the first step? Well there are many, and, just like the projects themselves no teacher would suggest that these ideas are the same for everyone. So, rather than try to create some sort of place-based template, I have framed some important considerations for you to contemplate. Ahead, I will be more explicit, and I hope, by sharing multiple examples, you will be able to take away valuable aspects of place-based learning that will fit your school as well as your distinctive teaching style.

Take a group of students outside, and begin the process of acclimating. Students need time to get used to a new classroom with a tall ceiling. You can't expect students to stay indoors for 107 days then suddenly go outside without feeling a bit overwhelmed. I recall teaching Math Their Way to first-grade students. The program was rich with many manipulative blocks, reminding me of an assortment of Legos. We needed several days of free play with these colorful blocks before we could really get down to business. Likewise, the first trip to the state archives in Madison differed from the third and fourth. By the latter, students marched right into the manuscript room at the Wisconsin State Historical Museum, sat down, and examined the historical documents as if they owned the place.

Besides working well in a particular subject area, the real power of place-based learning is its unmatched ability to integrate many subject area standards into a new student paradigm for learning. From the humanities to math and science to technology and media; if the project is comprehensive the learning goals can be as well. Beth Spieles, with the Center for Rural and Regional Studies at Southwest State University in Marshall, stated the broad scope of placed-based learning in an interview when she stated, "It's not studying the environment as another subject on top of everything else. It's using your local environment -- what's outside your door -- to study everything within the realm of subjects that you would normally study in the traditional classroom."¹¹

As you shift a pedagogical philosophy and learning plan into the community, this attending to new ways of learning will take time. Familiarity is always a key to sustaining achievement. It is important to distinguish a single field trip from field studies. One is a singular event; the latter repeated experiences over time. A good place to start field studies is at one of the many natural areas that each community is proud of.

One reason I developed a charter high school, based upon learning in the field, was an experience I had teaching my 45-minute English class of eighth-grade students. One afternoon, I was discussing with my students a weekend hike with three of my daughters, Hana, Cora, and Jamie along the limestone bluffs of Wildcat Mountain State Park. The more I shared with my students about the hike - the hawks flying below us, the blue sky, the warm spring winds - the more their many faces were overtaken by blank stares.

I pushed onward, "You know the State Park up the valley...close to where the Kickapoo River begins?" The blank looks continued. "C'mon, you've been canoeing from Ontario right below the park, right?" More stares.

Finally catching on, I asked, "How many of you have canoed through Wildcat Mountain State Park?" Seven of 26 students raised their hands.

How could nearly three-quarters of my students have spent the first 13 years of their lives without experiencing the upper reaches of the Kickapoo River, which defines their valley for 100 meandering

miles and flows by their homes a mere 15 miles south? One reason is that we, the schools; constricting our schooling day and practice to the brick and mortar; moreover, organized by the sequential, often separated, Carnegie subject defined course-based curriculum, had not seen the land or villages as a worthy enough 'classroom'. In effect, the physical building often becomes a 'comfort zone' that teachers are reluctant to move away from on any significant level. And the disconnected curriculum and testing mandates don't align well with the interdisciplinary life that defines natural and human habitats of place. Contrast this with the idea that a place based teaching and learning philosophy embraces the many unique learning platforms, whether the Kickapoo River or Main Street, that make up your own community – prioritizes them – unleashing the potential to transport a young person to phenomenal understanding and insight?

Paul Gruchow, noted Minnesota writer, put it best when he wrote in Grass Roots: A Universe of Home:

For me, the most important place on the farm was the cattail marsh at its north end. To get there, you took the farm's interior road, a grass track that ran east to the edge of the maple grove and then north as far as the waterway that drained into the slough from the east. The physical distance was not quite half a mile, but so far as I was concerned it might have been halfway around the world.¹²

Fifteen months after my conversation with 8th graders, the Kickapoo River Institute Charter School, mentioned earlier, ended its singular school year with a bicycling, hiking, and canoeing trip from the source of the Kickapoo to its confluence with the Wisconsin. We located the seeping source of the Kickapoo River, hiked until the stream was large enough for our canoes, and bicycled miles down the valley as well. On the fourth day we canoed again, leaving the mouth of the Kickapoo, gliding into the Wisconsin River, mere miles upstream from its confluence with the Mississippi. All of us felt a deep accomplishment, a strong sense of place, having traveled the length of the Kickapoo River, from origin to end. I understand this trip sounds more like a scouting adventure than school, and, in many ways -- it is. But these mini-community centered expeditions have a distinctive purpose of establishing a cohesive team of students; and moreover, opening each student's eyes to the wonders of home. I will

emphasize, again and again, throughout this book, that once the students are connected to place, then, without hesitation the academic standards will flow into each new place-based experience -- the learning really taking off.

Kelly captured this connection when she wrote:

Dear Kickapoo Valley,

For the time I have spent in your valleys, among your wooded forests and on your river I would like to thank you. I value you for your vastness in variety. From the tops of your ridges to the bottom of your streams, your diversity in life is amazing...peacefulness on your waters, enlightenment standing on your hills, joy and refreshment hiking through your forests will always be something that make me what I am today.

And Chris moved the place-based anchor feeling further with his thoughts:

...An island in time. Perhaps that is what the Kickapoo Valley is. A home to a diverse number of plants, animals, and people. No matter how far I travel, no matter what corners of the earth I visit, I will always return to the Kickapoo Valley. As time passes and changes occur it will forever be to me a place of small country stores and gravel roads that forever wind through the hills. It will stay in my heart as a place where I learned to love the land, a place where I learned to love the people of the land, and most of all a place I can call home.

Both Kelly and Chris articulate the profound impact schooling can have to students when it connects in a deep and vital manner to the place called home. When this is undertaken, curriculum leaves its separate silos of specialization and becomes strongly integrative and anchored anew. Place-based learning will push pedagogical design towards full integration, because studying the community's history, natural habitats, and economic capacity demands a big picture approach. A garden naturally produces diverse colors; likewise it is the nature of place-based field studies to integrate divergent subjects to reflect reality. As you can well imagine, place-based learning, by its very nature, is interdisciplinary.

Gregory Smith writing in Phi Delta Kappan relates that the purpose of place-based education is ‘to ground learning in local phenomena and students’ lived experience.’¹³ Smith goes on to suggest five thematic patterns evident in place-based education work to ‘engage a wide range of students in the demands and opportunities of learning.’¹⁴ These five are cultural studies, nature studies, real-world problem solving, internships and entrepreneurial opportunities, and induction into community processes.

Many of the place based project vignettes shared earlier fit into one of these categories. Any subject area, when overlaid with the philosophy and community sensibility of place-based learning, becomes a new experience for the student. And even more than this fresh and exciting pedagogical approach, the project learning invigorates a new understanding of home.

At the turn of the century, students were conversant regarding the plants of their home. Today, the technical nature of geology and biology are covered in high school or college science classes, but often their application in the community is narrow and limited. We too often miss a vital understanding and special relationship to the landscape and flora and fauna of home. After 100 days throughout the Kickapoo Valley in all sorts of weather, during every season, engaged in many place-based projects my students had a very new awareness and appreciation of our area. The natural landscape spoke volumes to these students. One student, Ximena, looked back several years after her KRI experience and wrote:

When I moved to the Kickapoo Valley area I never really set it apart in my mind as someplace special. However, through my year at KRI [the charter school], I began to see it for its uniqueness, for a community, and a beautiful place, unlike any other. I also got a glimpse of the multitudes of small towns that fill it, treasures in themselves.

To connect students like Ximena with home, we should take greater advantage of the opportunities for integrating curriculum offered by each place’s natural systems. David Orr supplies a comprehensive viewpoint in his work, Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect, when he asserts it is time for us to “take our senses seriously throughout education at all levels and

that doing so requires immersion in particular components of the natural world - a river, a lake, a mountain, a farm, a wetland, a forest, a particular animal, a lake, an island - *before* students are introduced to more advanced level of disciplinary knowledge.”¹⁵

Another way to express the relationship of schools and community comes from the work of the Land Institute in Kansas. Their project, The Matfield Green Consortium for Place-based Education in Salina, KS states that "schools really are the expression of the community." They have a purpose to “bring community members, teachers, and students together to learn about, celebrate, and nurture their home place.”¹⁶

Beyond community, always present, is the realization that nature itself is a powerful force for learning. “A dawn wind stirs on the great marsh...” Thus Aldo Leopold begins a beautiful marshland elegy to the Sandhill Crane. In a special commemorative edition of the Sand County Almanac, Leopold writes an eloquent piece about nature and understanding. He states: “Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language. The quality of cranes lies, I think, in this higher gamut, as yet beyond the reach of words.”¹⁷

I am convinced, more than ever, that essential life long-learning skills are wrapped around the field studies, activities, and projects that we encounter in place-based learning. When given a choice, people will learn: first, what they want to learn and second, what they need to learn in order to spend more time on what they want to learn. Human motivation and learning interests, though varying in degrees and often direction, are not much different whether one is 10, 40, or 70.

Watching students in place-based work is fascinating. Students want to be involved in what they learn, see the many talents and efforts bare fruit, and enjoy the comradeship of others while we learn. Sadly, schools too often reduce their mission to organizing and teaching units of knowledge where students seldom see the genuine fruit of their labors. You can't savor a test, worksheet, or contrived teacher activity that is *disconnected from a greater purpose* the way you can look back at a garden, community performance, historical survey, or restored habitat, which by their outcomes *project purpose* thereby allowing for

meaningful teacher-led activities, worksheets as needed, and tests to measure the level of learning – not to mention the student initiated learning that often drives the means and outcomes.

To reverse this tendency and uphold students as essential learners, we can return to the roots of place as a perpetual fountain of learning ideas, situations, issues, and problems to be solved, for community is the ultimate ‘case study’. It is education’s fundamental responsibility to help today’s students - and each succeeding generation - to take root in their home soil. We cannot continue to remove young people from the geology, botany, astronomy, geography, zoology, hydrology, and ecology of home as if it doesn’t make a difference. Besides understanding home, they can serve it like Doris Williams mentioned earlier. As Rebecca Jaycox writes, “place-based educators use local particulars to teach universal concepts, engage students in community life, and involve people and resources unique to the home community.”²⁰

Noah, a student from the Kickapoo River Institute, said it succinctly when he declared, “*The first thing you otta know is when we go outside we’re not stopped by the snow, when we set off tromping through the wetlands we’re not always with all our friends, we are spread out across a half-mile valley.*” Noah was referring to the previously mentioned yearlong wetlands restoration project, monitoring changes from a half dozen new ponds in a wide valley.

These last several years I have been working with more and more place-based elementary schools. By using community sensibility, multi-age learning design where applicable, and building an ‘adjunct faculty’ of community elders and experts, these elementary schools are setting the stage for a future of connected adults and influencing secondary education in a myriad of profound ways. The thrill of botanical research, for instance, is very different at 8 or 12, or even at 16 - like Noah - than at or 24 or 34. The biology of exuberance is in the favor of the younger person, for it is during those years that a life-long bond to the land is formed, interests are activated, and patterns of learning foundations established. When elementary schools ‘get it right’ then the work of their secondary colleagues is immensely more powerful and precise.

Aristotle asserted, “The fate of empires depends upon the education of youth.” We can redouble and refocus opportunities for

children and youth to immerse themselves in nature's teachings through place-based learning. We must shift the familiarity and routine of schooling from inside a building - where time is organized in predictable units - to outside, where time is wrapped around the learning needs of the community and the 'routines' of the seasons and landscape. Only then will the community and its natural rhythms have retained its proper place of importance at the table of education. Moreover, the value attached by students to this work will cement the learning to last a lifetime.

The Harvard Graduate School of Education addressed the power of place-based learning in its monograph, Learning in Place:

Pedagogy of place brings school and community together on a common pathway dedicated to stewardship and life-long learning. It is teaching by using one's landscape, family, and community surroundings as the educational foundation. Significant learning takes place outdoors and in the community. This community expands outward from local landscape and home, to regional realities, to international issues. In coming to know one's place, one comes to know what is fundamental to all places.²¹

Learning in Place goes on to describe in detail the historical roots of place-based education and its shared principles, as well as providing extensive narratives regarding place-based work in rural Pennsylvania, South Dakota, West Virginia, Tennessee, Maine, California, and Texas. Through its years of working with over 700 schools in 35 states, the Rural School and Community Trust (www.ruraledu.org) arrived at the following points they deemed essential in place-based education.

- The school and community actively collaborate to make the local place a good one in which to learn, work, and live.
- Students do sustained academic work that draws upon and contributes to the place in which they live. They practice new skills and responsibilities, serving as scholars, workers, and citizens in their community.
- Schools mirror the democratic values they seek to

instill, arranging their resources so that every child is known well and every child's participation, regardless of ability, is needed and wanted.

- Decision-making about the education of the community's children is shared, informed by expertise both in and outside the school.
- All participants, including teachers, students, and community members, expect excellent effort from each other and review their joint progress regularly and thoughtfully. Multiple measures and public input enlarge assessments of student performance.
- The school and community support students, their teachers, and their adult mentors in these new roles.

Place-based learning is, at its core, a personal journey. Each student redefines their relationships with the land, with the people, with the community through an increased understanding of home driven by new purpose. In my own life, and I would venture in every other person's as well, nature and people, family and place are all interwoven into an inseparable cloth of a mutual narrative. My childhood of Michigan vacation memories at White Sands Resort, small town Pontiac 4th of July parades, wandering the cornfield lined streams during rural Illinois summers, and small town Christmas memories with grandparents contrast strongly with my Chicago area urban/suburban upbringing. Moreover, those youthful bicycle excursions through the streets of Lombard and Elmhurst, a teenage 'bleacher bum' riding the early morning subways to be at Wrigley Field for 15 games during the historic 1969 season, and fast-pitch 'alley' baseball games against the back walls of the local grocer, contrast distinctly with college-age backpacking trips through Wyoming Wind River and Grand Teton mountain lakes, passes, and alpine wildflower meadows. Whether small town, urban/suburban, or wilderness; each stand timeless in my place based archive.

After a 15-year absence, a recent visit to Carbondale, Colorado, where I received an Associate Degree in Outdoor Education Leadership, underscored the importance of place - and people - in my life. Visiting with my former college teacher Barb Snobble and discovering that her husband Jack had recently passed away froze a

moment in time. For 24 months, which still feels like years, Jack had been like a father, as the lead teacher leading a motley crew of outdoor education students at Colorado Mtn. College. Jack and Barb opened their home for Tuesday evenings of American literature, reading and discussing Annie Dillard or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Jack also opened his stables to us restless riders and would lead us into the Pinion country, finding 19th century Ute Indian wickiup shelters, meandering canyons, and endless sky. He taught us to be outdoor leaders, no small honor from a man of the 10th Mountaineering Division of WW II fame. He was a man of many talents. After the war, Jack came home to his mountain valley and ventured up to Aspen, a small idyllic ranch town, with a few friends to see if this skill they had learned during the war - skiing - might have some place in a post-war society looking for rest and relaxation but imbued with reservoirs of pent-up energy.

Jack was a man of the mountains - and the mountains were in him. Rough, and rough again, like the mountain landscape, Jack enveloped life as the Indian paintbrush showcased the sage along the horse trails he carved into the greater Carbondale valley. Yet, Jack was a teacher - understanding, nurturing, knowledgeable, and connected to place. Caring and devoted to young people, he was impatient to see that each student learned from his mountains key lessons about life.

Standing in her kitchen, Barb proudly gestured to a wall-sized oil painting of Jack. And there he was, sitting atop his horse, deeply bronzed skin framing a fulfilled smile; hat perched, eyes betraying a rapture of love for the surrounding mountain landscape. Man, horse, and landscape are indistinguishable. Jack is Colorado.

I'm sure you can recall a person of place: the sailor at the dockside, the farmer in the field, the street vendor defining a corner, the teacher in the classroom. In a modern world of fragmenting connections, how will school contribute to the bonding of individuals with place? Or is Jack, and others like him, becoming a passing tribute to a passing time? Can a society wrapped in urban-minded priorities, cyber neighborhoods, and constant mobility actually create stewards of place? Or have we crossed a silent Rubicon with an agenda that now creates stewards of self?

Jack's strong personality matched the strong personality of the mountains. His preparation hadn't been years of schooling but years

of service to his country, community, and landscape of home. Would Jack be welcome in today's schools as a community elder working with a place-based teacher? I would hope so. Do our schools support character-development shaped by place, or do we install a system of rules, grades, and 'insideness' that tends to soften the 'edges' of character dimension? Jack was - to us students - well - Jack. He had his flaws, he had his gifts, but we all knew his love of the mountains, love of learning, and love of us students -- because it spilled from every pore of his body and soul.

How can we dissolve the barriers of design, time, intent, and outcomes that come between the school and community really thriving in partnership? How can we work to remove these barriers so young people can enthusiastically engage their understanding of people and place? Place-based learning is not exceptional; rather it is educating with the 'familiar material' of the local place by expanding the range of 'ordinary experience.' As mentioned earlier, I have called this organizing principle of place-based education, community sensibility, blending common sense and community awareness into the organizing mandates of a place-based learning pedagogy.

Ximena, quoted earlier as a student, is now a teacher herself, working with young students in a small town setting. How can we assure young teacher's liked Ximena that their community sensibility will be both honored and encouraged, and that the barriers to place-based learning will be removed so a new generation of understanding teachers can get to work?

One way is to grasp what is essential about learning. Recently, I heard a keynote entitle, ONLY CONNECT that has grown in meaning over time and has come into play, again and again, the way that only great ideas, like great books, can accomplish. William Cronon, the Frederick Jackson Turner and Vilas Research Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin asserted in his keynote that "Education for human freedom is also education for human community. The two cannot exist without each other."

Abraham Lincoln has been identified by historians and the public alike as the greatest President in American History. He was also a great example of place-based learning in action, consequence, and effect. Historians understand that the ability he brought to focus in his presidential years was a direct consequence of his many years as

lawyer doing the circuit in small town and rural Illinois. Each fall and spring, Lincoln would spend weeks “

To passionately perfect place-based learning; only one solution rings true; students must spend hours upon hours with passionate citizens and elders, in effect, community elders like Jack, in their home place. If school is truly, as Wayne Jennings, noted Twin Cities educator, proclaims -- ‘a time of life’ -- then each school must examine its place within the community, searching every nook and cranny of the places the students call home for every possible learning opportunity that will define this time of life.

Senior citizen lunch. The memories are vivid, years later. For several weeks the Kickapoo River Institute students, every Wednesday, ate lunch with the elders and talked about their common home. Jenny -- kneeling down on her left knee -- talking with an elder about making maple syrup. Together, each laughing about this shared tradition. Another student, Tim, -- learns about life on a 1930’s railroad -- from a conductor in his late eighties. Several students marveling at the collection of family photographs that another elder had spontaneously brought in, knowing that every Wednesday the students would be coming to lunch.

Like many fine initiatives across American education, the understanding that this youth/elder link can become the lifeblood of a school is well understood. Cheri knew it like thousands of other students who volunteer their time, or teachers, who share their class with the community elders, whether in a community center or at their homes, like my living room conversations with Leita Slayton.

Place-based learning begins with people but is always firmly rooted in place.

Going to school is a continual process of learning. We can, and must, create cycles of learning about the world, defining missions to serve and understand it better, creating expeditions of field study to achieve those missions, learning again, and then defining new missions as we start a new ring of growth. Jack would understand.

Chapter 8

Why Does Place-Based Learning Work for Today?

Zorba came upon an old man planting an apricot seedling and asked why he, an old man, was planting a new tree. “I live as though I would never die,” was his reply. “And me, I live as though I might die tomorrow,” said Zorba, “which one of us is right?”

- Nikos Kazantzakis

If there is learning taking place you can actually feel it, you can reach out and touch it.

- Howard Fuller

You have to take risks sometime.

- Cara, 22 Vermont

A generation ago, the 1983 report A Nation at Risk, focused national conversation regarding the state of American education: What was working? What was not, and why? How to fix it, tinkering or overhaul? By 1988, when I shifted careers from directing youth, family, and camp programs at the YMCA and began teaching in public school, these waves of change and reform, ushered in by its highly visible challenge, were beginning to crash upon the shore of school districts. Along with other career changers, as well as our younger colleagues, I joined newest generation of teachers. Energized, we had examined A Nation At Risk in our teacher education classes, had discussed the evolving federal and state policies, and saw ourselves as the new wave of innovators to address the needs driven into the national psyche through this seminal report.

Since my initial teaching 22 years has elapsed and reflecting upon this journey, I contemplate how education has changed, and moreover, to the point of this book, how place-based learning is a worthy pedagogy for the newest generation of educators.

By now, I trust you have a sense of what place-based learning is all about; you can appreciate what this work has meant to young people, and readily grasp the power place-based learning bestows upon in individuals and community alike. Furthermore, I would assert, confidently, that place-based learning reflects a ‘best practice’ targeted enough to matter in any learning community, comprehensive enough to impact a district, and inspirational enough to contribute to a vision for new schools, or renewal of current ones.

Why? The demands of this generation will be met by the building of relationships amongst young and old, school and community, serving and being served, attending to and being cared for, which are fundamental experiences of place-based learning.

When I first began teaching in 1988, it seemed I had so much time until the year 2000. With the echo of the ‘83 report still in our ears, making grand goals and aspiring visions for the change of the millennium seemed so logical. Now, in 2010, it seems like 1988 was a very long time ago. Myriad curriculum models spouting innovation and change, massive school reform and vast amounts of political posturing and policy initiatives have swept across the educational landscape. Some have taken hold, and some have long since

evaporated to the winds of change. With much accomplished, there is still significant work to be done.

The times are way beyond changing; the times are very, very challenging for educators. Increasing demands in the classroom, limits on funding for education, continued blame tossed our way, whether we ask for it, deserve it, or not. The demands of today demand we seek out best practices that move beyond incremental ways to improve student achievement. We need to upset the applecart of 'business as usual' schooling and support young people to believe. As Howard Fuller, Director of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University, noted to a group of educators in Milwaukee in the fall of 2002, "We are educating this generation not just to work in the 21st century but to create the 21st century!"

Opposite forces will come into play during this process. Schooling is evolving and devolving at the same time. Evolving, schooling is consolidating towards tremendous access to knowledge and conversation through the Internet. Imagine my students; they have always known the Internet - its ability to convey information, connect people and thereby build knowledge, which can lead to understanding when anchored correctly. This capability of access to raw information, networking in real time, and virtual libraries on demand challenge us a society in ways we are only beginning to understand.

On the other hand, schools are transitioning into loosely federated aggregates of students and teachers as life-long learners. Virtual knowledge building and communication has accelerated the melt of the rigid classroom walls. What is known as schooling is much more defined by connections and relationships than by structure and place.

Place-based learning fits this contrasting profile of learning. By reflecting the wisdom of the community as the final arbitrator of what learning can be, place-based learning takes the next step for education in the 21st century. Kids know this most readily. My guess is that schooling will look much different in a generation, much different.

With fractured consequences rather than a unified school and community approach, schools today possess, and are fitfully, at times, possessed by an organizing principle that keeps students inside the school. Knowledge remains piecemeal rather than integrated through a place context. There is a blind focus to anchor the power and place

of learning within the four walls of school, regardless of how valuable the community might be as a contributor.

Shouldn't our sensibilities be framed and shaped by the community where the school resides? The world around us, local or global, has vital issues that knock at the door of our schoolhouses for response. Students sometimes hear that knock at the school door; other times the community gives up on the school, oblivious - bored and frustrated with an effort too seldom reciprocated. And when the school and community don't work together they end up at arms length, missing an opportunity to grapple with vital economic, environmental, and engaging local issues of place. Today, with new connections and learning relationships evolving, that knock is louder than ever before.

Given an invigorated collaboration between school and community through place-based learning, we can, as educators answer that knock and make a difference. Students beseech us to pay attention to their needs to make a difference in the lives of others, now. Do they make a difference, today? Seldom. After a generation of reform since *A Nation at Risk*, each student's importance to his or her community has barely nudged off home plate. In too many cases, they haven't even come up to bat.

A premise of this book is to bring students to the plate. And by doing so, we all benefit. Ernest from Alabama and James from New Mexico, knew this in their respective comments: Ernest states, "*I wish that adults would understand that students do have innovative, mind-boggling ideas, and that students can put those ideas into action. And they can make the world a better place.*"

Asking to be part of the solution, part of the community is not much to ask of our schools overwhelmed with talented young people. James adds, "*Adults may have had a bad experience and they don't want to touch a subject, whereas youth will be ready to go in and dig it up and see what's there. When you think of community leaders, nobody ever thinks of a kid! Everybody's always thinking of the mayor, or these older guys in suits who make laws.*"

Again, action steps, dig it up, move forward. The future need not be vague, though we must understand that, as we move forward, real learning is murky. This murkiness often hides the messy, unclear steps to solve a problem: rather than canned, cut and paste, where the teacher knows the end before the project even begins.

Place-based learning, in fact, often has a murky start. Given birth through serious and genuine listening to each other; a student poses an inquiry, the question lingers in the air for a moment, and before we know it, as if magically, the students assemble intellect, passion, and interest to find the answer. From this focusing group of peers, the nature of the place-based learning is framed and off they go! The energy is palatable. When this happens a school really becomes a 'time of life.' As Ernest Boyer noted, each school community is " -- a purposeful place; a communicative place; a just place; a disciplined place, a caring place; and a celebrative place."¹

So this, in the end, is why I embrace place-based learning: wonder, irreverence, and of course, it works. Place-based learning, as Seymour Papert noted, will "create communities of common interest on projects that will connect with powerful ideas."² Youth across the spectrum of American education could hardly care what this powerful experience of worth, this connection with community, this engagement by making a difference is called - what really matters to them is that they matter! What concerns students concerns adults? How does my community need me? How can I contribute to others through a skill of my own? If not me, who? If not now, when?

What has changed since 1983? Places have changed, society has changed, our home, the parks, the open spaces, and of course schools. We have done much since A Nation at Risk report, but regarding true community as Boyer describes it, the results are more miss than hit.

A school is a community that within itself can embrace a greater community. Not just in newly designed units or in a rearranged formative structure but in how it shapes the greater community, be it the village, town, neighborhood, or even city, which it is inextricably nestled within.

A Nation At Risk turns the real focus on its head - it's not merely the nation that is at risk anymore, rather it is the relevancy that students associate with schooling itself in an age when information is everywhere, but collaborative and purposeful school effort is spare. What do we do with all this knowledge? If the strength of a nation is connected to an involved citizenry, then there is a deep lesson relevant from place-based learning.

Community and academic achievement: place-based learning

does both!

Purpose defines the individual; gathers others to achieve and in doing - believe. It's deceptively simple and hasn't changed in generations upon generations. Reports or not! Place-based learning emanates from this collaborative vision of teachers, students, and community resonating a vibrant democracy. Sentiments like Nicque's, a high school freshman Wisconsin leader, affirm what I and student's like herself have experienced numerous times over when she proposes, *"There is no elitism in true knowledge, only wonder and irreverence. You can't approach learning in awe; or you'll never be able to truly learn. For any subject to become knowledge, a pupil must touch details, smell them, and feel them."*

Chapter 2 Place-based Learning

¹ Toni Haas, Paul Nachtigal. Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeway, Environments, and Purposes of Education. (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1998) (ED 420 461)

² David Orr. Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect. (Washington, DC: Island Press,), 170.

³ Paul Theobald. Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 173.

⁴ Paul Theobald. 'Preparing teachers for our nation's rural schools' (Basic Education Online <www.c-b-e.org/be/iss0201/a0toc.htm> January 2002 Vol. 46 NO. 5), 138.

⁵ Barbara Cervone, Executive Director, What Kids Can Do <www.whatkidscando.org>, EdVisions Forum discussion. Posting #21 of 150 <www.edvisions.coop> (29 January 2003).

⁶ Janice Woodhouse, Clifford Knapp. Place-Based Curriculum and Instruction: Outdoor and Environmental Education Approaches. 2002, ERIC Digest: ED448012

⁷ Barbara Cervone, What Kids Can Do on-line feature, <www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/doriswilliams.html>

¹⁰ www.ruraledu.org (Place-based projects are summarized by topic area., 2003)

⁸ Vito Perrone, “Why Do We Need A Pedagogy of Understanding?” in Martha Stone Wiske, Ed. Teaching For Understanding: Linking Research with Practice. (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1998), 19.

⁹ John Dewey, Democracy and Education. (New York: The Free Press, 1916),

¹¹ Beth Spieles, environmental information officer, Center for Rural and Regional Studies, Southwest Minnesota State University, on-line interview at <www.crrs.net/story47.htm>

¹² Paul Gruchow. Grass Roots: A Universe of Home

¹³ Gregory Smith. Place-Based Education: Learning to Be Where We Are” (Phi Delta Kappan, April 2002), 586.

¹⁴ Smith, 590.

¹⁵ David Orr. Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect. (Washington, DC: Island Press,), 96.

¹⁶ The Matfield Green Consortium for Place-based Education in Salina, KS (www.landinstitute.org)

¹⁷ Aldo Leopold. Sand County Almanac,

²⁰ Rebecca Jaycox. (2001) Rural Home Schooling and Place-Based Education. Charleston, WV: ERIC Digest: EDO-RC-01-

²¹ The Harvard Graduate School of Education published the monograph, Learning in Place (2000)

